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## The Western Balkans and the Alliance: All Is Not Well on NATO's Southern Flank?

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*NATO maintains its dedication to its “open door policy,” and the Western Balkans effectively constitute the only potential enlargement area for the Alliance in the near future. Three Western Balkan countries are official membership candidates but their NATO bids suffer from a string of problems which have already delayed and could potentially also derail their Alliance prospects. Currently, the main tasks of Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are to construct a positive political discourse related to their Euro-Atlantic prospects and to persevere with their NATO ambitions. Such a feat, however, will not be achieved without completion of Alliance related “homework.”*

### Introduction

During the last 14 years, NATO has seen three rounds of enlargement with 12 Central, Eastern and Southern European states joining the Alliance in 1999, 2004 and 2009. Looking at the timings of these events, one could conclude that the next NATO summit, in 2014, five years after the entry of Albania and Croatia into the Alliance, and ten and fifteen years after previous enlargements, will indeed be an enlargement summit, as stated by the then U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, however, keeping up with the seeming tradition of enlarging NATO every five years is in itself far from enough to guarantee that invitations will be extended to new potential members at the 2014 gathering.

In the aftermath of NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit, the Alliance's deliberations on taking in new members centred on the Western Balkans, a region which includes five non-NATO and four non-neutral states, out of which three (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro) could, in European Union parlance to NATO reality, be called Alliance “candidate countries.” Theoretically, the aforementioned trio constitute the only viable enlargement options for NATO, with Georgian and Ukrainian membership perspectives either distant or effectively on hold. In spite of this, all is not well on NATO's southern flank, and this paper aims to investigate the problems of the Alliance's Western Balkan neighbourhood more thoroughly.

The paper will present and assess the trio's NATO linked ambitions, as well as those of the “non-candidate” Western Balkan countries of Kosovo and Serbia, which could in the next couple of years either lead them into the ranks of the Alliance or profoundly transform their relations with the organisation. The five case study countries might share common themes behind their political and security engagement with NATO, but often find themselves travelling not only at different speeds but also perhaps on different trains as regards their Euro-Atlantic prospects and reality. Bosnia's NATO bid ground to a halt due to internal political problems, Macedonia perseveres with its insistence on membership in the Alliance despite

<sup>1</sup> “Clinton Says NATO Membership Should Grow at Next Summit,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, [www.rferl.org/content/nato-should-grow-at-next-summit-says-clinton/24588476.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/nato-should-grow-at-next-summit-says-clinton/24588476.html).

a seemingly trivial international obstacle blocking its progress, Montenegro seems like a serious contender for a NATO invitation at the 2014 summit, Kosovo must first become a universally accepted player on the international relations stage before furthering its Euro-Atlantic ambitions, and Serbia seeks NATO standards but is not interested in membership. Simultaneously, NATO itself may not be perfectly convinced of the merits of further enlargement. Thus, before detailing the ins and outs of individual Western Balkan issues in relations with the Alliance, the paper will first assess the rationale behind NATO enlargement in the region, and the organisation's readiness and willingness to follow this path.

## The Rationale Behind Prospective Enlargement

According to NATO's 2010 *Strategic Concept*, the Alliance is dedicated to its "open door policy," i.e. it remains open "to all European democracies which share the values of our Alliance, which are willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership, and whose inclusion can contribute to common security and stability."<sup>2</sup> In theory, this could be read as a summary of a straightforward application procedure by which applicant is immediately invited to join NATO whenever it meets the required criteria. In reality, however, the Alliance does not subscribe to the "bicycle theory," sometimes invoked in relation to the EU, i.e., it sees no need to move forward constantly (to expand or enlarge) in order to justify its continuing existence.<sup>3</sup> A look at the aforementioned obligations from the *Strategic Concept* only reinforces this notion, as NATO insiders are free to interpret the subjective criteria as they see fit, and apply them with various degrees of enthusiasm and diligence to any given "candidate country."

If we were to assess the last three enlargement rounds solely against the criteria of sharing the Alliance's values, willingness and ability to take up membership while adding value for NATO by providing rather than consuming security, we would most likely reach the conclusion that hardly any of the post-1999 members should have joined the organisation in the first place. Moreover, the Western Balkan candidate trio is hardly in a better negotiating position than its often larger, richer, more democratic and geo-strategically pivotal Central, Eastern and Southern European NATO predecessors. Thus, almost any NATO member state is in theory perfectly within its rights to question the rationale behind inviting Bosnia, Macedonia or Montenegro, not to mention the disinterested Serbia, or Kosovo—which is not recognised by some NATO member states—to join the Alliance.

However, the Western Balkan candidates' membership bids enjoy, as is evident from Clinton's remark, a fair degree of support within the Alliance, especially from neighbouring NATO countries which perceive NATO as a force for stabilisation and normalisation in the region, and very much (alongside the EU) a part of the solution to regional issues and woes.<sup>4</sup> Herein lies the key political convergence area between the Alliance and the potential members from the Western Balkans, the latter of which view NATO membership as a vindication of their Euro-Atlantic ambitions, a confirmation of their desire for and sense of belonging to a wider and successful community of European and Western countries, and last but not least a security and stability guarantor in a region which, on the societal and political levels, still suffers from instability and lack of trust amongst the key stakeholders.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, an extension of NATO membership to the Western Balkan candidate countries could contribute to the Alliance members' safety and stability by enforcing democratic standards and developing a sense of community and security ownership amongst NATO neighbouring states which have a history of troubled relations with each other.<sup>6</sup>

Further enlargement of the Alliance, and a fair and positive management of the process, could also be seen as an element of NATO's post-2014 relevance, when the drawdown from Afghanistan is to be completed.

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<sup>2</sup> NATO, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19–20 November 2010*, [www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat\\_Concept\\_web\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See: K.H. Kamp, "NATO Enlargement Reloaded," [www.mapn.ro/smg/gmr/Engleza/Ultimul\\_nr/kamp-p.136-146.pdf](http://www.mapn.ro/smg/gmr/Engleza/Ultimul_nr/kamp-p.136-146.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. "Eighth Trilateral Ministerial Meeting of Bulgaria, Greece And Romania—Joint Declaration, Sofia, 12 November 2012," [www.mfa.bg/uploads/files/BG-RO-GR%20Joint%20Declaration\\_agreed%20final.pdf](http://www.mfa.bg/uploads/files/BG-RO-GR%20Joint%20Declaration_agreed%20final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See: S.R. Grillot, R.J. Cruise, V.J. D'Erman, "Developing Security Community in the Western Balkans: The Role of the EU and NATO," *International Politics*, vol. 47, iss. 1, 2010, pp. 62–90.

<sup>6</sup> See: Z. Křiž, M. Stixova, "Does NATO Enlargement Spread Democracy? The Democratic Stabilization of Western Balkan Countries," *Central European Political Studies Review*, vol. 16, iss. 1, 2012, pp. 1–33, for a study on how NATO "contributed to the democratic stabilization of candidate [Albania, Croatia and Macedonia] countries."

Admitting new members will not suffice as the Alliance's *raison d'être*, but it could be testament to NATO's ongoing attractiveness, especially in the light of future, post-Western Balkan enlargements.

## Homework to Be Done

Despite solid support from neighbouring NATO countries, the existence of the aforementioned political convergence area, and arguments questioning the Alliance's relevance in the light of further enlargements, one should not assume that more vigorous political lobbying on behalf of the candidate countries is all that is needed to ensure NATO's expansion. After inviting the likes of Albania, which could hardly have been regarded as a candidate meeting the necessary requirements,<sup>7</sup> NATO is wary of any potential premature enlargement, and even the proponents of Western Balkan expansion temper their support with the condition that the aspirants "do their homework."<sup>8</sup>

In the case of the Western Balkan candidates, plus the two non-candidates who wish to upgrade their links and relations with the Alliance, the homework amounts to a string of administrative, organisational and political challenges which need to be addressed. Unfortunately, completion of the homework does not mean an automatic invitation to join NATO, as such a decision is political and subjective in nature. Thus, in some cases, especially in Macedonia, the homework amounts to the aspirant's determination and perseverance while faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and objections which are difficult to counter. Paradoxically, NATO's reluctance towards the Western Balkans only compounds the "all is not well" assumption highlighted in this paper.

The table below, which precedes a detailed analysis of each of the five case studies ranked in order of their NATO prospects, offers a snapshot of some of the outstanding Alliance related issues, and attempts to demonstrate the differences between the Western Balkan countries in respect to their links and relations with NATO. It focuses on international recognition (an issue for three cases studied and a block to Macedonian NATO membership), membership of Partnership for Peace (PfP) and Membership Action Plan (MAP) (both prerequisites to being invited to join NATO), military considerations such as size and professionalisation of armed forces, participation in ISAF in Afghanistan, and defence budget (important points to consider in terms of cases studied as potential security providers), participation in regional defence cooperation bodies (which legitimise a given country's international ambitions and, to an extent, act as a NATO ante-chamber), and support for NATO membership (an internal legitimising factor for NATO membership).

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<sup>7</sup> See: V. Morelli et al., "NATO Enlargement: Albania, Croatia, and Possible Future Candidates," *Congressional Research Service*, [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34701.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34701.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Andrej Slapnicar, Minister Plenipotentiary, Head of the Security Policy Department, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 11 April 2013.

	International recognition	Partnership for Peace (PfP) member	Size of the armed forces <sup>9</sup>	Professional army	Support for NATO membership	Membership in the Adriatic Charter	Defence budget (as of GDP)	Membership Action Plan (MAP) membership	South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process (SEDM) membership	International Security Assistance Force contribution <sup>10</sup>
Bosnia and Herzegovina	no recognition issues	yes (2006)	10 550	yes (2006)	70% <sup>11</sup>	yes (2008)	1.4%	yes (2010) <sup>12</sup>	yes (2007)	53
Kosovo	not recognised by four NATO member states	no	0 <sup>13</sup>	yes <sup>14</sup>	n/a <sup>15</sup>	no (observer)	0.7% (2011)	no	no	0
Macedonia	name recognition issues concerning the dispute with Greece	yes (1999)	8000	yes (2006)	80% <sup>16</sup>	yes (2003)	1.3%	yes (1999)	yes (1996)	158
Montenegro	no recognition issues	yes (2006)	2080	yes (2006)	29% <sup>17</sup>	yes (2008)	1.7% <sup>18</sup>	yes (2009)	yes (2009)	27
Serbia	no recognition issues <sup>19</sup>	yes (2006)	28 150	yes (2011)	15.6% <sup>20</sup>	no (observer)	2.2%	no	yes (2010)	0

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise stated data on armed forces and defence spending in relations to GDP is derived from IISS, *The Military Balance 2013. Chapter four: Europe*, vol. 113, Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> As of 22 April 2013. See: "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): Key Facts and Figures," [www.nato.int/nato\\_static/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2013\\_04/20130422\\_130422-isaf-placemat.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2013_04/20130422_130422-isaf-placemat.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Public Opinion Poll Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) August 2010," [www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_Bosnia\\_Poll\\_Report\\_August\\_2010.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_Bosnia_Poll_Report_August_2010.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Effectively in suspension.

<sup>13</sup> The 2,500-strong Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) is technically not yet an army. NATO is to authorise its operationalisation in 2013.

<sup>14</sup> If KSF is treated as a nascent military.

<sup>15</sup> In May 2013, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies asked about this for the first time, in its *Kosovo Security Barometer*. The results are to be published later in the year.

<sup>16</sup> Data from April 2010 (simultaneously 65% of the Macedonians refused to agree to their country's name change "as a price of joining NATO." See: I. Armakolas *et al.*, *NATO and the Western Balkans*, Hellenic Center for European Studies, [www.ekemprogram.org/awg/images/stories/staff/nato-balkans.pdf](http://www.ekemprogram.org/awg/images/stories/staff/nato-balkans.pdf). Macedonian security experts interviewed during NATO ARW 984495 estimated that "there is a high degree of public affirmation for EU and NATO accession (once it was 92% and it was never under 70%)." Linking the two demonstrates Macedonia's determined, two-pronged drive to access the Euro-Atlantic community.

<sup>17</sup> "Lazanski: Do Not Humiliate Yourselves by Sending Generals as Military Attaches," *Vijesti*, 24 March 2013, access through ProQuest database.

<sup>18</sup> "Montenegro Report on Implementation of the Third Annual National Programme," Podgorica, February 2013, [www.mip.gov.me/en/images/stories/download/Report\\_on\\_implementation\\_of\\_the\\_Third\\_Annual\\_National\\_Programme.pdf](http://www.mip.gov.me/en/images/stories/download/Report_on_implementation_of_the_Third_Annual_National_Programme.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> However, the majority of NATO member states (except four) have recognised Kosovo as an independent country.

<sup>20</sup> Data from 2011 gleaned from interviews with experts of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy and the University of Belgrade, April 2013.

## Macedonia: Of Names and Vicious Circles

Achievement of one of the “the two national goals of full-fledged membership of NATO and the European Union” might not be possible for Macedonia in the near future, as the country finds itself in a comparatively precarious position as far as its Alliance ambitions are concerned.<sup>21</sup> In practice, all that stands in the way of joining the Alliance is finding resolution to a longstanding dispute with Greece, over the country’s name.<sup>22</sup> Had this been solved earlier, then Macedonia would already have joined NATO, as an invitation was promised at the 2008 Bucharest summit, alongside Albania and Croatia. Nowadays, however, it seems likely that this issue’s lack of resolution could mean that Macedonia will miss yet another enlargement round. This seems even more puzzling when we take into account the fact that the country joined MAP as early as 1999, it provided support to NATO KFOR troops transiting the country on their way to Kosovo, and invested in its contribution to ISAF in Afghanistan.

Macedonia perceives NATO membership as a validation of its pro-Atlanticist policy choices, and, to an extent, an ante-chamber to EU membership. Both are seen as representing “vital interest to the long-term stability, security, and well-being of the Republic of Macedonia.”<sup>23</sup> The country maintains it has met the NATO membership criteria and promises more military reform by 2015.<sup>24</sup> Its army enjoys high social standing as it has not (a rarity for a security sector institution in the Western Balkans) “provoked many scandals.”<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously, the Macedonian public, traditionally very supportive of their country’s Euro-Atlanticist approach, is becoming tired of sacrifices made by Macedonia in the name of joining NATO and the EU. Some claim that every Macedonian foreign policy disappointment fuels a vicious circle of bouts of political instability and renewed doubts about Skopje’s ability to honour and realise its international commitments, which are then followed by further domestic disagreements.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, renewed instances of ethnic strife and violence between the country’s Macedonian and Albanian citizens only validate a widely held critical perception of Macedonia.<sup>27</sup>

## Montenegro: Hopeful but not Popular

Montenegro is the youngest of the Western Balkan NATO “aspirants.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it is to an extent the most hopeful of the applicants, and looks forward to a NATO invitation in 2014. However, it suffers from a problem of a relatively low public support for membership, especially amongst the country’s Serbs. The country struggles with promotion of Euro-Atlantic integration and hopes that the opening of a NATO information centre will amend the situation. Moreover, the Montenegrin authorities sometimes link their country’s membership of NATO with eventual EU accession, and present joining the former as “a step towards” the latter.<sup>29</sup> The ongoing economic crisis also complicates Montenegrin NATO ambitions, and serves to dampen public support for Alliance membership, as the country strives to reach the level of 1.8% GDP spending on defence (including net military pensions).

For the last seven years Montenegro has been involved in PfP, and in late 2009 was invited to join MAP. Montenegro has a track record of successful lobbying for its NATO candidacy, and enjoys strong regional

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<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Defence, Republic of Macedonia, *White Paper on Defence*, October 2005, <http://merln.ndu.edu/whitepapers/Macedonia-2005.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> “NATO’s Relations with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” [www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-28201724-91B38C10/natolive/topics\\_48830.htm?selectedLocale=ru](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-28201724-91B38C10/natolive/topics_48830.htm?selectedLocale=ru).

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Macedonia, “Goals and Priorities,” [www.mfa.gov.mk/?q=node/411&language=en-gb](http://www.mfa.gov.mk/?q=node/411&language=en-gb).

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Defence, Republic of Macedonia, *White Paper on Defence*, September 2012, [www.morm.gov.mk/data/file/morm/bela%20kniga/WHITE%20PAPER%20OF%20DEFENCE.pdf](http://www.morm.gov.mk/data/file/morm/bela%20kniga/WHITE%20PAPER%20OF%20DEFENCE.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> A. Bogdanovski, “Macedonia,” in: F. Klopfer et al. (ed.), *Almanac on Security Sector Oversight in the Western Balkans*, BCSP and GCDCAF, Belgrade, 2012, p. 135.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Rade Rajkovchevski, of Faculty of Security Studies—Skopje (University of Bitola), Belgrade, 26 April 2013.

<sup>27</sup> *Reuters*, “Five killed in Macedonia, fear of rising ethnic tension,” 13 April 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/04/13/uk-macedonia-killing-idUKBRE83C14F20120413>.

<sup>28</sup> See: Ministry of Defence, Montenegro, *Draft Defence Strategy*, Podgorica, October 2008, [www.odbrana.gov.me/en/sections/strategic-documents/90381/168694.html](http://www.odbrana.gov.me/en/sections/strategic-documents/90381/168694.html).

<sup>29</sup> “Sirens Took Away Their Appetite,” *Dan*, 6 November 2012, accessed through ProQuest Database.

support from Balkan alliance members. Montenegro has made significant progress not only in the field of defence, but also in relation to its pro-European agenda (the EU commenced accession negotiations with Montenegro in June 2012), judiciary reform, enforcing the rule of law, establishment of good relations with neighbours, and involvement in regional cooperation. However, the seemingly impressive results of its security sector reform are yet to be tested against Montenegro's everyday organisational and political conditions.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Montenegro further augmented its status amongst NATO allies by participation in ISAF (and commitment to remain present in Afghanistan after 2014).<sup>31</sup>

## **Bosnia: Divisions, Defence Property and Ammunition Sites**

Ongoing inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic political manoeuvring and bickering in Bosnia, which have been paralysing the functioning of the country, effectively derailed Bosnian Euro-Atlantic ambitions and progress.<sup>32</sup> Bosnian-Serb politicians seek the country's demilitarisation and neutrality, which would completely quash Sarajevo's NATO prospects. Moreover, they also block the implementation of the 2012 agreement concerning immovable defence property (and the transfer of 61 identified properties to the country's ministry of defence),<sup>33</sup> which suspends Bosnia's MAP participation and effectively nullifies high public support for Alliance membership (although there is no such support amongst the Bosnian Serbs) and a longstanding PFP membership.

The fully professional and multi-ethnic Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina number 10,550. During the last eight years its elements (at platoon level) have been deployed to Iraq and (from 2009 onwards) to Afghanistan (currently at the military police task force operations centre in Kandahar), and this undoubtedly strengthens Bosnia's political credentials as a potential alliance member.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, the military continues to be hamstrung by the legacy of the past (the force is an amalgam of formerly rival military entities), inter-ethnic rivalries and low operational capabilities (with up to 20% of the force involved in guarding often obsolete arms and munitions sites scattered around Bosnia).<sup>35</sup>

## **Serbia: No Longer an Outsider**

Serbia, despite its troubled past relationship with NATO and the latter's 1995 and 1999 interventions in the region, should no longer be regarded as the odd one out from amongst the Western Balkan states. In theory, the country is in an exceptional position, as a Western Balkan country which is neither a NATO member nor seeking membership.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, it does not dispute NATO's positive role in the stabilisation of the region and wishes to improve its relations with the Alliance "on the basis of direct, close and long-term cooperation and common action."<sup>37</sup> An example of this cooperation is the 2005 Serbia–NATO agreement "to allow Allied forces serving as part of KFOR to pass through Serbian territory" which, in Serbian eyes, augments the allied troops' standings as security guarantors of the Serbian minority in Kosovo.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> R. Radevic, E. Kalac, "Montenegro," in: F. Klopfer et al. (ed.), *Almanac on Security Sector Oversight in the Western Balkans*, BCSP and GCDCAF, Belgrade, 2012, pp. 174–175.

<sup>31</sup> See: "Montenegro Report on Implementation of the Third Annual National Programme," *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> The recent arrest, during an anti-corruption clampdown, of Zivko Budimir, president of the Bosniak-Croat (Muslim) Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH) could be seen as an example of internal political squabbling. See: "President of Bosnia's Muslim-Croat federation arrested for corruption," *Euronews*, 27 April 2013, [www.euronews.com/2013/04/27/president-of-bosnia-s-muslim-croat-federation-arrested-for-corruption](http://www.euronews.com/2013/04/27/president-of-bosnia-s-muslim-croat-federation-arrested-for-corruption).

<sup>33</sup> I. Vejvoda, "The Western Balkans and the 2012 NATO Summit," [www.gmfus.org/archives/ivan-vejvoda-congressiona-testimony-the-western-balkans-and-the-2012-nato-summit](http://www.gmfus.org/archives/ivan-vejvoda-congressiona-testimony-the-western-balkans-and-the-2012-nato-summit).

<sup>34</sup> P. Moon, "The Armed Forces of BiH—Exporting Peace and Security (from US Ambassador Patrick Moon's blog)," [www.mod.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/vijesti/?id=24148](http://www.mod.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/vijesti/?id=24148).

<sup>35</sup> V. Azinovic et al., *Assessing the Potential for Renewed Ethnic Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Security Risk Analysis*, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, and Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, 2011, pp. 81–95.

<sup>36</sup> J. Radoman, "Serbia and NATO: From Enemies to (Almost) Partners," BCSP, 2012, [www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/nato\\_and\\_serbia\\_\(2\).pdf](http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/nato_and_serbia_(2).pdf).

<sup>37</sup> "National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia," Belgrade, October 2009, <http://merln.ndu.edu/whitepapers/SerbiaNationalSecurityEnglish2009.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> "NATO's Relations with Serbia," [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50100.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50100.htm).

Serbia has been a PfP member since 2006, and focuses its security sector reform on developing and trying to achieve NATO standards without actual NATO membership. Local experts agree that the country has prepared the necessary legal framework and introduced the necessary oversight institutions to conduct and oversee the aforementioned reform, but simultaneously express serious doubts about the intentions of the political class, and the implementation of future changes.<sup>39</sup> Serbia seeks the inter-operability of its defence systems with those of NATO members and candidates,<sup>40</sup> and to an extent markets the engagement with the locally highly unpopular Alliance as an element of its “Europeanisation” strategy (in tandem with its EU candidacy), its drive to modernise the armed forces, and its approach to present Serbia as a security provider and a reliable international partner. At the same time, Serbia professes neutrality but is theoretically able to join a military alliance (with NATO effectively the only potential candidate) subject to endorsement in a referendum (an unlikely feat, given the recent opinion polls).

Its professional military, the largest in the Western Balkans with the highest defence spending to GDP ratio of all the countries analysed here, in spite of recent cuts in military budget, has played modest roles in eight UN military missions, and others with the EU,<sup>41</sup> and is undergoing far-reaching and long term reconstruction.

### **Kosovo: Of Major Stumbling Blocks and Operationalisation**

Kosovo is not in a position to lobby for or even to think realistically about NATO membership in the short or medium term, as it falls short of the criteria outlined in the *Strategic Concept*. It relies on the Alliance as security provider and guarantor of its independence. NATO’s KFOR, numbering around 5,500 troops, continues its presence in Kosovo, and remains one of the most popular security institutions in the country (with 60% of the respondents to a survey satisfied with its work).<sup>42</sup> Four NATO allies (Spain, Romania, Slovakia and Greece) are yet to recognise Kosovo, and the country is still not a member of the United Nations.

However, besides budgetary issues (Kosovo spends only 0.7% of its GDP on defence<sup>43</sup>) hardly anything prevents the country from transforming the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF), a lightly-armed nascent Kosovan military numbering 2,500 troops, into a fully-fledged army able to participate in peacekeeping missions. The decision to authorise KSF’s operational capability rests with NATO and is expected in June 2013. The expectations are high (as well as the public support for this venture) as the Kosovan authorities have mentioned that “2013 is going to be the year of the Kosovo Army.”<sup>44</sup> No major opposition to this transformation into a proper army is expected within NATO, even amongst the member states that do not recognise Kosovo, as they have all been involved or are involved in KFOR, which mentors the KSF in the processes of recruitment, training and capacity building. This does not, however, mean that construction of the regular armed forces, barred from the country’s areas inhabited by Serbs, should be seen as a major achievement on the road to NATO membership, as any future progress on this issue will be conditioned by a final resolution of the dispute with Serbia and settling of the recognition issues.

### **Conclusions**

NATO’s Western Balkan neighbourhood could be described as being in a state of flux. Western Balkan states aspire to either join the Alliance or achieve its standards, also as a means of legitimising their EU bids, but many of their reformist attempts fall short of NATO requirements. Their often meagre steps on the road to NATO membership, and seemingly petty issues blocking their progress, are testament to the fact that indeed all is not well on NATO’s southern flank.

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<sup>39</sup> P. Petrovic et al., “Serbia,” in: Klopfer et al. (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 181–211.

<sup>40</sup> M. Taleski, I. Jovanovic, “Macedonia, Serbia Boost Military Co-operation,” *Southeast European Times*, 5 April 2013, [www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/features/2013/04/05/feature-02](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2013/04/05/feature-02).

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, “Current Multinational Operations,” [www.mod.gov.rs/sadrzaj.php?id\\_sadrzaja=4366](http://www.mod.gov.rs/sadrzaj.php?id_sadrzaja=4366).

<sup>42</sup> Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, *Kosovo Security Barometer*, December 2012, [www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Kosovo\\_Security\\_Barometer\\_Report\\_English\\_152996.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Kosovo_Security_Barometer_Report_English_152996.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Office of the Auditor General, “Audit Report on the Annual Financial Statements of Ministry of Kosovo Security Forces for the Year Ended on 31 December 2011,” [www.oag-rks.org/repository/docs/RaportiAuditimit\\_MFSK\\_2011\\_Eng\\_831121.pdf](http://www.oag-rks.org/repository/docs/RaportiAuditimit_MFSK_2011_Eng_831121.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> S. Kabashaj, “Kosovo Security Force Looks to Become an Army,” *Southeast European Times*, [www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/features/2013/01/10/feature-02](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2013/01/10/feature-02).

Moreover, in the eyes of the NATO allies, the Western Balkan achievements could always be checked by a multitude of domestic problems and issues (legacy of the past, inter-ethnic strife, troubled international relations, recognition issues, economic condition) which seemingly should take a back seat during discussions about membership of the Alliance. In short, the five cases studies (including the most hopeful, Montenegro) still need to work on constructing a positive discourse on their Alliance prospects, amongst NATO members.

In order to create such a discourse, all five of the Western Balkan states discussed in this paper should return to the issue of completing, no matter how challenging or mundane, their homework. Thus, Macedonia must not only lobby other NATO members to persuade Greece to drop its opposition to Skopje's Alliance membership, but must also present flexibility and goodwill while directly dealing with Athens. At the same time, it must withstand any further delays and obstacles on its road to NATO, while maintaining Alliance standards throughout its prolonged waiting period. Montenegro needs to work on assuring higher public support for NATO membership. Since a fair share of its internal opponents are Serbian nationals, it must also conduct a diplomatic and public relations offensive in the region, to try to convince the Serbs there to drop or at least limit their opposition to NATO. If Belgrade, which is quite positively attuned to the Alliance on governmental and expert levels, were to be co-opted in Podgorica's efforts, then one could well imagine less radical opposition to NATO membership from the Montenegrin Serbian minority. In such a situation, Bosnia could join Montenegro in its diplomatic and public relations efforts, and focus its homework not on internal negotiations with the radically negative Bosnian-Serb politicians but on assuaging the NATO oriented negativity amongst the inhabitants of Serbia. Consequently, this could push Bosnian-Serbs away from opposing Bosnia's entry into the Alliance, and present Belgrade as the region's responsible stakeholder and a force for stability and inclusiveness. It could also seriously improve Serbia's image in the EU, and its chances for a more robust negotiations process with Brussels. Last but not least, all of this should also improve Kosovo's international position, which could only benefit from breaking the log jam of Serbian popular opposition to NATO throughout the region. Kosovo would not benefit from this by joining the Alliance, which is a very distant possibility anyway, but could further its normalisation with Serbia and move forward on seeking universal recognition, also amongst some of the reluctant NATO members.

NATO could play a positive role in all of these developments mostly by recognising the achievements of its Western Balkan neighbours and assuring all member states appreciate their efforts in constructing a positive discourse on behalf of the three candidate countries, plus Serbia and Kosovo. The Alliance is already conducting far-reaching engagement with all countries of the region which perceive NATO as a security and stability provider, and a mechanism for validation of their own often difficult domestic policy choices. NATO's mission in the region, however, will not be accomplished without further Euro-Atlantic steps on the part of the Western Balkan states.